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# Traditional Pastoralism in the Asturian Mountains: an Ethnoarchaeological View on Mobility and Settlement Patterns

David González Álvarez

## Abstract

In this work we study, from an ethnoarchaeological perspective, the different ways of live in the traditional communities of pastoralists in the mountain areas of Asturias (Northern Spain). Different solutions are documented on settlement patterns and residential mobility in a very small geographic space. Rural communities in these mountainous areas have preserved, until very recently, some traditional ways of life in which livestock have had a major influence on their livelihoods. The domestic animals have been exploited with an interesting variety of specialized formulas, involving different settlement patterns and residential mobility systems. It is very interesting to contrast the coincidence of different groups of shepherds - with different ways of life - in a limited mountainous space, and the strong geographical and environmental constraints of Asturian mountains. This creates a research context where we can reflect on the great variability of social and cultural aspects within Pastoralism. We will try to understand the construction of identities in a frontier area and to discuss about the use of labels like “nomads” or “transhumants” in prehistoric archaeology.

KEYWORDS: *Pastoralism, Mobility, Mountain Areas, Identity, Frontier Areas.*

## Introduction

The region of Asturias occupies the western part of the Cantabrian coast in northern Spain (Fig.1). Since prehistoric times human communities in this area have

evolved different formulas to use their environment, with pastoralism becoming particularly important after the Neolithic period and the Bronze Age (DE BLAS 2008: 556-560; MARÍN 2009).

The relief of the Asturian landscape is extremely complex.

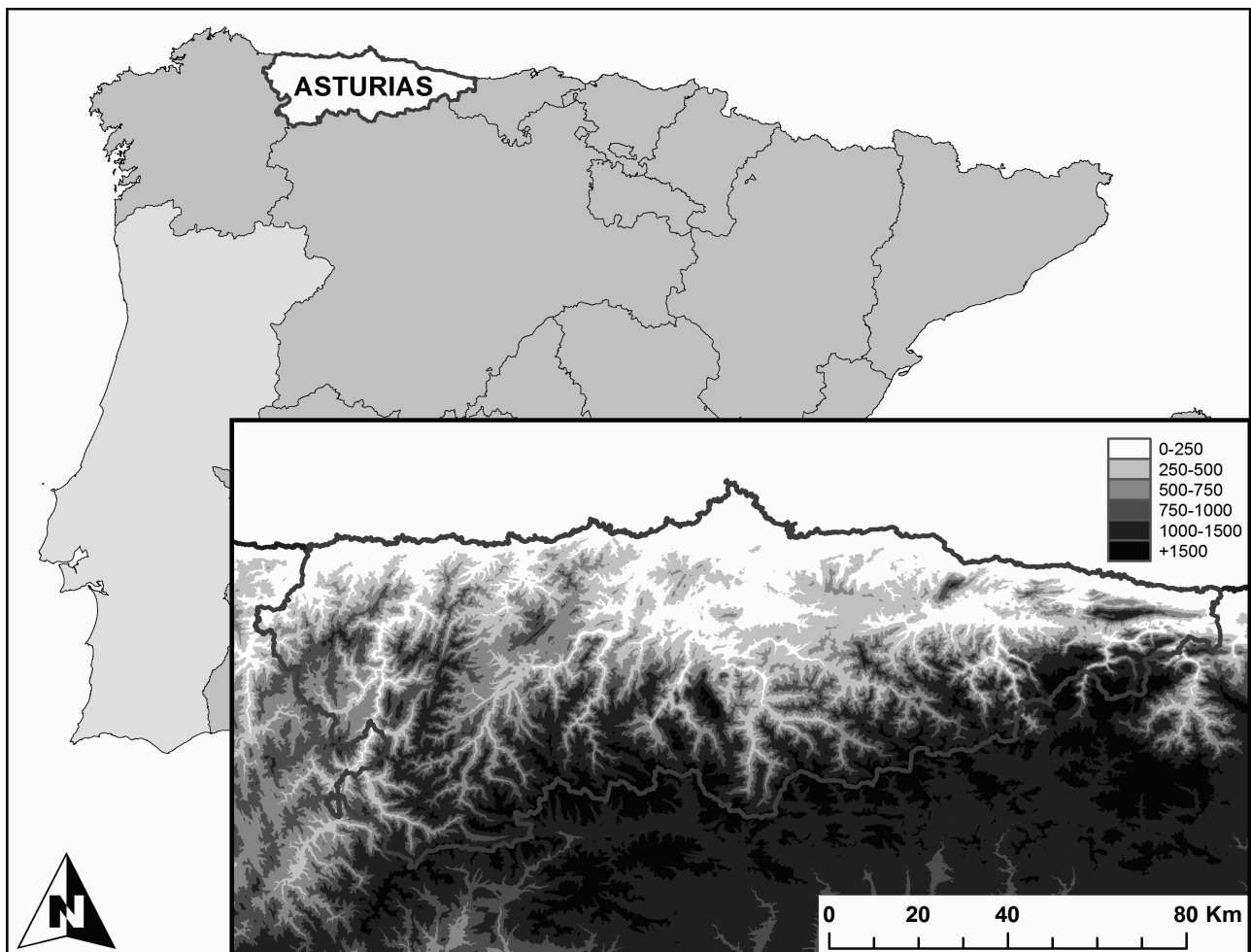


Fig. 1. Location of Asturias (NW Spain).

Peaks of more than 2600 metres high are found in the Picos de Europa massif, only 20 kilometres or so from the Atlantic Ocean. These great differences in altitude give rise to an environmental reality which has favoured the development of different models of mobile pastoralism which had remained in use until a few years ago (GARCÍA MARTÍNEZ 2003). In this region, characterised by an Atlantic climate, herds and flocks can be sustained by making seasonal use of the different ecological niches that result from variations in height.

## Aims

In this presentation I shall describe an ethnoarchaeological study on the forms of habitat in the upper pastures and their exploitation by traditional groups of Asturian pastoralists. The most interesting finding is the remarkable variability in pastoral ways of life within the same mountainous areas. This kind of studies will be used like interpretative points of reference in my ongoing doctoral research on the social construction of the Iron Age landscape in this area.

The ethnoarchaeological study of the last forms of pastoralism still practised today has given me a better understanding of this subactual cultural landscape, which in some respects might well resemble that of the pre-Roman communities with regard to land use, settlement and perception of the surroundings (GONZÁLEZ ÁLVAREZ 2009). However, I do not intend to establish mechanical analogies between a subactual reality and the Iron Age. I believe instead that this ethnoarchaeological approach can provide me with interpretative stimuli and throw some explanatory light on matters relating to herding and mobile pastoralism that are so difficult to contrast in prehistoric records.

The continuity of certain material forms, such as field systems and settlement patterns, does not mean there has been continuity of cultural forms since prehistoric times. We would be making a great mistake if we drew mechanical parallels between these historical realities as this would result in a simplification of reality.

## The Ethnoarchaeology of Pastoralism in the Asturian Mountains

The traditional dedication to pastoralism in the rural communities of the Asturian mountains is clearly reflected in the settlement patterns. Different forms of mobile pastoralism have had a considerable influence on the anthropisation of this area (LÓPEZ SÁEZ *et al.* 2006; LÓPEZ MERINO 2009; MORENO *et al.*, in press). Pastoralist activities developed without any great changes until some 50 years ago, when a strong cultural shift towards the present-day capitalist society led to the demise of the rural world in its traditional form (GONZÁLEZ ÁLVAREZ in press).

This locally-evolved type of pastoralism - which even in its present form has its roots in the late Medieval era (FERNÁNDEZ CONDE 2001) will be one of the interpretative points of reference in the doctoral research I

am currently carrying out on the territorialisation and social construction of the Iron Age landscape in this particular geographical area.

## Subactual Pastoral Systems and Mobility

An interesting diversity of pastoral forms entailing seasonal mobility is found in the Cantabrian Mountains (GARCÍA MARTÍNEZ 2003; LÓPEZ, GRAÑA 2003; VALLADARES 2005). Pastoralist families feed their livestock over the annual seasonal cycle by making use of the diverse ecological niches found at different levels of altitude. This has led to a marked dualism in which the separation between summer and winter has a strong influence on aspects related to the economy, sociology and religion (GARCÍA MARTÍNEZ 2008). Certain phenomena associated with isolation and endogamy have been observed in these mountain areas, which are described in studies carried out on forms of marriage (GÓMEZ 2001). In contrast with the predominantly pastoralist ways of life described below, the traditional settlements of sedentary peasants are grouped in small villages forming the basic cells of rural space organisation (GARCÍA FERNÁNDEZ 1980).

In the Asturian mountains we find three systems of pastoralism, depending on the patterns of settlement and mobility.

### *Transterminant pastoralism (short-distance transhumance)*

In communities that practise terminant pastoralism the main dwelling place is found in the villages of the mountain valleys. Pastoralism is combined with a small-scale agriculture. Neither agriculture nor livestock is predominant; rather, they complement each other as the basis of a subsistence model. The livestock is fed by making use of the diverse ecological niches which, thanks to differences in altitude, are found in close proximity to each other in the mountain valleys. Procedures involving the movement of livestock are regulated by local by-laws established by common law.

This is the most common formula for mobile pastoralism in the Asturian mountains. It is not a homogeneous activity. It has variations depending on the different species of livestock, the length of stay in the upper pastures and the herders' established patterns of movement between the *brañas* and the villages. The *brañas* and *mayadas* also show local differences in their formal characteristics (ÁLVAREZ GONZÁLEZ 2001; BARRENA 2001; GRAÑA, LÓPEZ 2007; CONCEPCIÓN *et al.* 2008; LINARES 2004).

The livestock, which includes mainly cows, sheep and goats (also horses and even pigs), is taken up the mountains to the fresh summer pastures at the beginning of spring. Here the animals graze together either on open spaces or in enclosed fields, depending on the particular circumstances. It is in these higher areas that we find the groups of huts known as *brañas* or *mayadas*. The livestock is attended by different people who go up to the pastures and either spend



the night in the *brañas* or go back down to the villages. Apart from tending the animals, their job entails milking and taking the products obtained (such as milk, cheese and lard) down to the villages.

Traditionally, it was elderly people, women and young people who went up to these pastures while the adult males stayed down in the villages harvesting and processing cereals and hay. Recent restructuring of the rural environment has led to families abandoning subsistence agriculture in order to specialise in livestock. As a result, it is the men that now go up to the pastures.

In the pastoral *brañas* and *mayadas* there was place for leisure and fun. Young people from nearby summer settlements would often gather together and improvise festive activities. Livestock fairs and feast day celebrations also took place with dancing, feasting and traditional games (SORDO 1997: 73-74; LÓPEZ, GRAÑA 2003: 107-108). On such occasions people from different sides of the mountain were able to mix and this provided opportunities to exchange produce or, in the case of young people, do a bit of flirting.

The seasonal settlements of transterminant communities can be grouped into two categories, depending on their form and their use (GARCÍA MARTÍNEZ 2003; LINARES 2004; GRAÑA, LÓPEZ 2007).

- Equinoctial *brañas*, used in spring and autumn, are found at lower altitudes. Although they are above the tree line they are quite close to the villages. The buildings are rectangular constructions, with either tiled or thatched roofs, each consisting of a stable for the

animals on the ground floor, a hay loft under the roof and a room for the shepherd. They are surrounded by enclosed fields that provide hay in summer, which is stored and used as a reserve in autumn. The buildings are complemented by drinking troughs and structures for keeping the milk fresh (Fig. 2). Beyond the enclosed fields, livestock belonging to all the families grazes together in the pastures. In these lower level *brañas* there may be small scale cultivation of rye, spelt wheat and potatoes.

Use of these settlements begins in spring after the last snowfall. When summer arrives the herds are taken up to higher settlements until their return in September. Thanks to the barns and access to stored hay the animals are able to stay here well into the autumn, when the risk of snowfall and severe overnight frost makes it advisable to move them down towards the valleys. In winter they graze in pastures close to the village, spending the night in barns and complementing their feed with hay harvested in summer.

- The summer *brañas* are found at a higher altitude in what are the best pasture lands in the Cantabrian Mountains. They are occupied between June and September, usually after the animals have been in the equinoctial *brañas*, which is where they return at the end of the summer, although some families only take their livestock up to the summer *brañas* and remain in the villages in the valley for the rest of the year. The huts are small and rudimentary, with neither a stable nor a hay loft. They are generally circular, with



Fig. 2. La Pornacal (Somiedo, Asturias) a typical equinoctial *braña*.

either corbelled stone or thatched roofs, although some may be slightly larger and rectangular in shape. Here there are no enclosed fields to provide hay (Fig. 3). The surrounding pasture land is for collective use and the livestock grazes freely. In addition to tending the animals, other activities are carried out in these settlements, such as cheese-making.

Equinoctial and summer *brañas* are typical of the most widespread systems of mobile pastoralism in these mountain areas. Similar parallels can be found in other mountainous regions in the north of the Iberian Peninsula.

### *The vaqueiros d'alzada*

The *vaqueiros d'alzada* (ACEVEDO 1893; URÍA 1976; GARCÍA MARTÍNEZ 1988; CÁTEDRA 1989; SÁNCHEZ GÓMEZ 1989; GONZÁLEZ ÁLVAREZ 2007) include a unique group found in the central and western parts of Asturias. They are communities of transhumant pastoralists who practice a biseasonal pattern of mobility between their winter villages, situated in the coastal and inland valleys, and the summer villages in the mountains, where they stay for up to nine months. The journey from one settlement to the other is known as the *alzada*. It takes several days and the great symbolism attached to it helps to reinforce the group's identity. The whole family changes their place of residence, taking their herds and their possessions with them.

The settlement pattern of the *vaqueiros d'alzada* is centred on the summer villages which are the key to their forms of

production. They resemble sedentary villages in appearance, with a few crops, enclosed fields and multipurpose dwellings with a stable and hayloft. Nevertheless, there are important differences. The architecture of the houses is different, both in form and function, from those of other rural parts of Asturias. The main areas of the house are the barn and the hayloft, which determine its size and shape. Although there are some horticultural plots, agriculture is of minor importance.

The houses form the core of the *vaqueiros d'alzada* summer settlement with the productive areas lying around it. Enclosed fields are found in the most fertile zones near the houses and consist of a few family properties bounded by stone walls and used as grass meadows or for crops (Fig. 4). The pastures, which are exploited collectively, are found some distance away and constitute the most important area as they provide sustenance for the livestock which is mainly cattle.

Winter settlements have a similar layout, although the land is of poorer quality. These settlements serve as shelters from the harsh mountain winters.

Apart from pastoralism, they occasionally turn their hand to commerce and transportation between the two sides of the Cantabrian Mountains. This was a way of obtaining enough money to buy cereals suitable for bread-making, which their own land did not produce in sufficient quantity.

The exclusive nature of this group within Asturias can be distinguished by a series of peculiarities relating to its identity and economy, as well as to more material aspects. Traditionally, the *vaqueiros* were to some extent



Fig. 3. A little *mayada* in the Ventaniella Pass area (Ponga, Asturias).



*Fig. 4. La peral ( Somiedo, Asturias) is a summer village in where the vaqueiros d'alzada still practise transhumance nomadays.*



*Fig. 5. Merino shepherds with their flock in the Cantabrian Mountains, September 1957 (LOMBARDÌA and LÒPEZ, 2003: 207)*

marginalized. It was widely believed that they formed a “different race” whose ancestors were not of common Asturian stock. Of the many stories that went around, aimed at substantiating this, the most predominant was the idea that they were descended from the Moors. However, a more likely motive for this marginalisation was to be found in issues related to the economy, ecology and religion (GARCÍA MARTÍNEZ 1988; CÁTEDRA 1989).

### *Merino Shepherds*

Until a few decades ago, large flocks of transhumant sheep from Extremadura and Castile were moved over long distances to the pastures of the Cantabrian Mountains. These were the last heirs of the guild known as the *Honrado Concejo de La Mesta*. The journey between the grasslands of Extremadura and those of the Cantabrian foothills took between 20 and 30 days. The shepherds led their flocks on foot, accompanied by mastiffs and pack mules (Fig. 5).

The use of pastures at such great distances from their place of origin was made possible thanks to rental arrangements agreed with the local communities. These received payment, both in money and in kind, from the outsiders.

The shepherds stayed in huts made of plant material which were built when they arrived at the mountain passes towards the end of May. These were sufficiently robust to last a few years although every year the local youths destroyed the huts once the shepherds had left (LÓPEZ, GRAÑA 2003). These were not simple acts of vandalism; the youths would help the shepherds build the huts when they arrived to the pastures. In exchange, the shepherds used to prepare a feast in which they cooked and served lamb after sacrificing one of the best sheep in the flock. It was the only occasion on which sheep were slaughtered to be eaten. This is a good example of the ritualised pacts between different pastoral communities on the usufruct of high pasture land in frontier areas.

The stay in the mountains lasted until October when it was time to begin the journey back to the pastures of Extremadura where winter would be spent.

### **Final Remarks**

The variability in patterns of animal husbandry in the Asturian mountains has produced an interesting and diverse process of anthropisation of the landscape, in which we find different synchronised models of settlement related to different forms of mobile pastoralism. This provides an excellent point of reference for those of us involved in research on the Prehistory of mountainous regions.

In general, when pastoral mobility is considered as a hypothesis for understanding the ways of life of prehistoric groups, the finer points of each form of mobility are not usually specified in detail beyond the proposal of labels like “nomads” or “transhumants”. Ethnoarchaeological approaches such as this help us take account of the enormous variability within pastoralism, both in forms of habitat and mobility.

The ascent of shepherds and their flocks to the upper

pastures of the Cantabrian Mountains brought about the cohabitation of different groups of people in the same area. This gave rise to an interesting flow of social and economic relations between the different communities. Not only was it possible to exchange products, but also information and orally transmitted stories (VÁZQUEZ VARELA 2001; LÓPEZ, GRAÑA 2003). Contact between different groups gave each group a greater knowledge of the world. It became a support for the construction of their respective identities (*sensu* HERNANDO 2002), either through reference or opposition with regard to “the other” (GONZÁLEZ RUIBAL 2003). This was something that was of great importance in pre-industrial communities with a tendency to be isolated, like these mountain communities.

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